

Which Side Are You On?

THE AMERICAN INQUISITION: 1945-1960.
By Cedric Belfrage. Bobbs-Merrill. 316 pp.
\$8.95

By VICTOR S. NAVASKY

IN A FOOTNOTE ON PAGE 268 of *The American Inquisition*, Cedric Belfrage recalls that when an earlier book, *The Frightened Giant* (a personal account of life as an inquisitee), was published, Dwight MacDonald, in the course of a lengthy review in "the CIA-financed journal, *Encounter*," spent so much time pointing out that support of Wallace, opposition to the Korean War and defense of the Rosenbergs revealed the "consistent pro-Communism of the National Guardian" (the paper which Belfrage co-founded and edited for eight years before he was deported from the U.S. in 1955) that little space was left to discuss the book.

I can't resist giving Mr. Belfrage cause for yet another footnote complaining that yet another reviewer has slighted his book for the circumstances surrounding it. It's not that *The American Inquisition*, a sometimes black and sometimes bleak history of America's postwar hysteria, is packed with old left clichés: In the first place a fair proportion of the old left clichés of the '50s turn out to be the perceptions of the '70s (see the "rhetoric" of Paul Robeson and W.E.B. DuBois on the condition of black Americans); and in the second place, in case there was any doubt, despite his portside politics, *Inquisition* makes clear that

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the only party line in Belfrage's house was connected to his telephone, which was probably tapped by the FBI.

But nothing in Belfrage's book—some of which has the antique odor of yellowed National Guardian clips—is quite as jolting as the circumstances under which it has been published. Barred under the McCarran-Walter Immigration Act from the United States for 18 years (after uncooperative appearances before HUAC, the McCarthy Committee and the immigration authorities), not only was the British-born Belfrage, who had lived here for 25 years, forced to write his entire history without once entering the United States, but when the book was ready to be published, it took petitions and entreaties from scores of senators and congressmen, writers' organizations, fellow journalists and editors before the State Department would grant Belfrage 30 days (!) to come here to plug his book. Even so, a State functionary in Mexico (where Belfrage made his home) first required him to answer a series of humiliating and irrelevant '50s-type questions about his alleged Communist past—this at a time when our President was resting between trips to China and Russia. It is altogether fitting, proper and typical that the publisher was late getting the book out, and Belfrage had come and gone before the book was in the stores. (Lest anyone dismiss Belfrage as an isolated case, consider that unconnected political aliens are not so lucky: having no one to plead their cause, they are forever barred—or will remain so until someone at State decides to rewrite exclusion criteria, unwise in the '50s, indefensible in the '60s, unforgivable in the '70s.)

That aside, it is worth pondering the message of this occasionally satirical-sweet, but more often

outraged-bitter account of the so-called McCarthy years: that far from starting with Joe McCarthy, inquisitions—which pre- and postdated Tailgunner Joe—are as American as cherry pie; and that in the never-ending struggle between the "inquisitors" and the "heretics" it is the spectators who are really on trial. Readers of the old Guardian, PM, I.F. Stone's Weekly, The Nation and other heretical journals will find little here that is new, much to reconfirm old suspicions; others, while they will not necessarily be "convinced" (Belfrage has given us less a brief than an occasionally elliptical parade of excesses), will surely be astonished at how poorly some of today's most celebrated liberal intellectuals behaved when their community

was under attack. Neither The New York Times nor The Washington Post, for instance, came to the defense of the National Guardian's free press rights when its editors were set upon by the Congress.

There is an exile mentality which seems to transcend individual ideology whereby one's politics remain frozen at the point of departure from one's country. Belfrage may not be entirely immune from the phenomenon, but in his case we can be grateful. Even though it may sound old-fashioned, it's relevant to be reminded that ultimately inquisitions leave no room for moral bystanders. Each man, in the words of the old union song, must answer for himself, "Which side are you on?"

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